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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that leadership among children is a function of the group and that situations can be manipulated to encourage leadership. Teachers can intervene to influence the development of positive forms of leadership in all children. Three areas for teacher involvement are apparent. Teachers can (1) become more sensitive to their own attitudes and values regarding the display of leadership behavior in children; (2) create an environment which enccurages independent judgement and self-direction in the classroom for at least some part of the day; (3) provide opportunities for students to acquire and enhance skills that are related to leadership. (Author/RH)

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Development of Leadership Capacities in Children

Susan Hillman and Jerry Smith

Most knowledgeable observers believe that the issues to be faced in the 80's by our country and the rest of the world will place unusual demands on those in leadership positions, regardless of the setting--state, or corporation, or the field - education, science, or medicine.

Unfortunately, the elementary and secondary schools of this country have already made whatever contributions they are going to make to the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that leaders will need to function in such positions. The 80's are upon us, and most of the leaders for this period have finished or will soon finish their schooling. But it is not too late for teachers to begin to foster leadership skills for the 90's and for the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This article is written with three assumptions in mind 1) that school teachers do have an important contribution to make to the development of leaders for ten and twenty years from now, 2) that teachers must have and can have a clearer perception of their responsibility as builders of leaders, and 3) that teachers must begin now to include the content, materials, and methods necessary to develop the leadership capacities of children. Although the needs are equally acute in elementary and secondary schools, because of space limitations, this article will deal only with the work of elementary teachers.

Before moving on to a discussion of leadership capacities in children and what teachers can do to develop these capacities, it seems wise to say a word about leadership itself. While there are literally hundreds of definitions of leadership, generally, they can be classified into three broad categories:

those that describe leadership as residing in the individual--a trait, personality characteristic or behavioral skill; those that focus on the relationship between leaders and followers; and those that emphasize the situation in which the leader and followers find themselves. While the emphasis in this article is on skill development in children, the leader-follower relationship and the situation are also given some attention.

What do we know about the leadership capacities of children? Studies (Murchison, 1931; Brooks, 1937) show that infants, as young as six months of age, can demonstrate leadership when placed in a constructed play situation with other infants who are the same age. As children move into preschool, they do show consistent leadership styles. (Skinner, 1941, Stone & Church, 1973). There are generally two types of leaders at this level:

1. The bully or the tyrannical boss who uses physical domination as the primary approach in directing others.
2. The diplomat or adviser who uses words and persuasion as the potent force in directing others.

When children were asked which leaders they liked best, a vast majority favored those categorized as diplomats (Thompson, 1962). If a child's leadership is based on physical domination alone, s/he cannot be sure of retaining leadership since others are less likely to follow (Skinner, 1941). Leaders at this level are continuing to initiate more contacts, demonstrating an organizing ability in getting the group together, yet conforming to the general wishes of the group (Murchison, 1931; Murlock, 1972).

An early study by Jack (1934) indicated that much more could be done to train children to use special skills in the leadership of others. She took 18 four-year-old preschool children and classified them into high,

middle and low groups on the basis of ascendancy scores. These scores were derived from observation of the children's attempts to secure materials or position in line with their own interests and to direct the behavior of others. The scores also took into account the children's success in both types of attempts, and the extent to which they provided a pattern for other children to follow.

Jack selected five children from the low-ascendant group and familiarized each individually with materials to be used later in training situations. In each case, the child was taught the knowledge and skill necessary for use of the materials. Later, when paired with children from the other groups, four out of five of the low-ascendant children demonstrated ascendancy scores that were "markedly greater than their initial scores..." and increased their relative scores vis a vis their companions as well. Finally, they outscored a control group (39.40 points to 1 point) of five non-ascendant children of the same age.

As childhood programs, leadership becomes more persistent with the leader representing the characteristics valued by the group. For this age, the groups are usually homogeneous with regard to the sex of members, and age differences seldom exceed two years (Merei, 1973). Thus, sex and age are basic criteria in determining who will become the leader of a particular group. The leader must exhibit interests common to the group and be superior in the traits important for the activities in which they lead (Brooks, 1937; Harrison, Rawls, and Rawls, 1972). A leader's superiority, however, cannot be too great for this would isolate the child, as seen with children who have an extremely high IQ (Murchison, 1931; Brooks, 1937).

Merei (1973), using Hungarian school-aged children, conducted a highly interesting experiment. Children were observed and rated on the following behaviors:

1. Times they followed orders or gave orders.
2. Times they imitated others or were imitated.
3. Times they participated in group play.
4. Times they attacked, cried, or told on each other.

Children who were rated "average" overall on these criteria were placed in small experimental units for thirty to forty minutes each day. Within each unit, one of these children who had not been rated as a leader before became one. Immediately, this child's scores of giving orders and being imitated increased. Apparently, then, leadership is relative to the group. When a group of "average" leaders is formed, one of them takes on the role of leader.

After the group was consolidated with their traditional ways of operation established, another child was brought in. This child was slightly older and had rated high in the initial observations of giving orders, being imitated and participating in group activities. In all experimental units, the group absorbed this leader, forcing its traditions on him/her. Thus, the group's traditions were shown to be stronger than an individual leader. Nevertheless, these newly assimilated leaders did adapt to the group and exerted their influence in one of the following observed ways:

1. Giving orders which mimicked the group's traditions. (The group would have done these things anyway.)
2. Claiming ownership over toys and passing them out.
3. Adding elaboration in play, quickening the pace, changing the degree of concerted action, and so on.

Merei demonstrated that the situation, the group's traditions, the degree of cohesion, and the leader's influence are all important in the development of leadership at this age.

From preschool through elementary school, leadership skills are developing. The groups are expanding to encompass more children. Leadership is becoming more consistent. Dominance, initiative, and self confidence are qualities that continue to be helpful to leaders throughout the elementary years. However, added factors such as sex, homogeneity in groups, and conformity to the group's traditions are intertwining with these characteristics to influence the development of leadership.

Even though these qualities are important in the development of leadership, they are neither rigid nor unchanging. As Jack (1934) and Merei (1973) found in their studies, the situation can be manipulated to encourage leadership. The teacher thus emerges as a powerful intervening force who knowingly can influence the development of positive forms of leadership in all children.

The research indicates that basically, there are three broad areas in which teachers can aid in the development of leadership in children:

1. Teachers can become more sensitive to their own attitudes and values toward the display of leadership behavior in children.
2. Teachers can create an environment which encourages independent judgment and self-direction in the classroom for at least some part of the day.
3. Teachers can provide opportunities for students to acquire and enhance skills that are related to leadership.

While these three items do not exhaust the possibilities, they do provide a useful starting point.

Teacher Attitudes and Values

Before much can or will be done by teachers to develop leadership potential in children, they must understand their own attitudes and values toward children who exercise leadership. It is generally understood that each teacher views the classroom as his or her own territory. S/he is the leader if you will, and the children are the followers. Some teachers prefer a more controlled environment with each student doing pretty much what others are doing at any given moment in time. Such teachers usually are fairly directive in their own leadership style and expect students to pay attention and follow orders. As Lippitt and White pointed out in their study of boys' club members under different styles of leadership, this teacher behavior is likely to yield two quite different reactions from children. One reaction is to withdraw and become fairly passive recipients of the teacher's directions. The second is to engage in agressive behavior, usually directed against someone other than the teacher. Children who react in the first way fail to acquire all of the assertiveness they will need to be effective leaders, and children who react in the second way acquire followers mainly through threat and coercion. In either case, children are not permitted to develop their full leadership potential.

The first step, then, for any teacher interested in the whole issue of leadership behavior in children is to ask himself or herself what s/he believes leadership to be. The teacher is more likely to develop positive attitudes when leadership is understood not in the narrow frame of skills associated with a specific position such as chairperson of a committee or president of the student government, but in the broader context of developing a life-long sense of responsibility to the needs of others. When placed in

this context, most, if not all, teachers will accept the value of providing opportunities for students to engage in leadership activities.

Creating an Environment for Leadership

It is crucial that teachers understand the significance of building supportive classroom environments. They are the architects of social climates whether or not they wish to be and the failure to acknowledge this only results in either a haphazard approach to climate building or a laissez faire climate. The significance of climate building as an urgent task is made evident through the study reported by Merei (1973). He found that young children evolved their own traditions as a group during play periods and that when a new child leader was introduced into the group--even though older and more experienced in leadership--he was absorbed by the group and was required to follow the group's traditions in order to maintain his leadership position in the group. Failure to do so led to the unwillingness of the group members to follow his acts of leadership. What this suggests among other things is that the traditions that are established early in a group's functioning are likely to be resistant to change by a new leader. Therefore, a broadly humane environment, created initially by the teacher, will make it difficult for a single disgruntled child to destroy such a positive climate. Or to put it positively, a child who wishes to become a leader must begin by adopting the traditions of the group. If these traditions enhance humane values and activities, any child wishing to lead must do so within the structure of humane values already in place.

One of the ways of building a supportive environment is to allow children to choose an activity of interest as a way of fostering their initiative. Some children may be hesitant to choose because the flood of stimuli is too

great for them. Offering two or three activities may be more easily handled while the initiative to choose remains. If a child still does not respond, step back, wait, and observe. By forcing the child into choosing an activity, nothing will be gained. The child may just not be ready. Some children need to observe for several days before venturing out. Therefore, an adequate physical environment needs to be created along with an emotional environment where a child is allowed to grow at his/her own rate. The teacher's knowledgeable and patient building of the physical and emotional environment can aid tremendously in the growth of initiative and self-confidence in children. This, in turn, increases their leadership potential.

One of the most effective ways for elementary teachers to create a supportive environment presents a paradox. It is easily accessible to the teacher and yet difficult to achieve--a change in one's own behavior. According to Whitmore (1973), teachers can improve their classroom environments by:

1. showing they respect and genuinely care for individual students,
2. stressing the positive accomplishments of pupils and developing careful plans that allow students to succeed
3. encouraging pupils to assume responsibility for directing their own activities.
4. building cohesiveness among the students through regular class meetings for sharing and problem solving.

Not all teachers are able to do each of these things as well as they would like, but they can learn to improve their behavior in these areas by attending workshops, reading more detailed descriptions of these procedures, and experimenting within their own classrooms.

Skill Building

As we have seen from the research, a variety of skills are necessary for the development of leaders. Which should be given priority by the teacher depends upon the age of the child, the skills already possessed, and the repertoire of the teacher.

Before the teacher can build skills, he or she must spend some time observing each child in interaction with others. The teacher can keep an anecodtal record of who contributes suggestions to the group, who voices unusual opinions, who performs work independently of the teacher, and so on. When a teacher is knowledgeable of leadership acts children can and do perform, then s/he is in a better position to build on existing strengths in offering guidance to each child. In doing so, however, the teacher must be careful not to simply reinforce the status quo of the existing roles and statuses. Because Billy is good at organizing his peers to cooperate in the accomplishment of a project, the teacher can unwittingly make sure that he invariably performs that role in the group when it might be wise for him and the other children to give him opportunities to perform in a wider variety of roles.

Preschoolers can acquire positive leadership skills while imitating their teacher. Allowing for input when a field trip is upcoming or when it is time to change the room around will give children a model to follow and a chance to engage in a group problem-solving activity. It is important, however, to act on suggestions given and not cast them aside, for this will negate the effectiveness of the process.

Ample opportunity needs to be provided for preschoolers to socialize. The opportunity to use large blocks and a housekeeping corner will induce

group play. Some children may neither be interested in nor ready to play with others. This needs to be respected. Eventually though, the older preschoolers especially will take the opportunity to engage in play together. Skills in working with others and exercising assertiveness will be used and developed.

Conflicts will undoubtedly arise. Along with providing opportunities for socializing, preschool teachers need to allow the children to solve their own conflicts. The first instinct, it seems, is to rush in on a situation when an argument is in process to try to "help solve it." Whereas, without interference, the children might have solved it themselves. As difficult as it is, teachers need to observe and when in question, hesitate. Unless physical danger is imminent, there is no need to intervene. In solving their own conflicts, preschoolers will gain in self-reliance and in developing coping skills with others. Rather than continually turning to the teacher for solutions, they will learn their own ways of handling situations. A leader needs to learn these essential skills.

One of the first things every teacher can and must do is to promote the self-respect and self-acceptance of every student. Schmuck and Schmuck (1971) describe a number of techniques for doing this including strength building exercises, mixing high, medium and low-status students in academic work groups, role playing, preparation of biographies by fellow students, and other means.

In her book, Learning Together, Elizabeth Drews distinguishes two mutually complementary processes, "leading out" and "letting be" and insists that every teacher must engage in both. "Leading out," she contends "can be done gently and solicitously, as we have seen for those who have been physchologically blinded and crippled. Or it may simply mean helping the eager questioner find answers."

For us, leading out also means leading into . . . leading into new experiences, leading into a new sense of oneself, leading into new opportunities to expand and display one's own potential. Teachers who lead students into new opportunities to be and to express themselves are helping to create the leaders of tomorrow by acting as leaders themselves.

"Letting be" is a complementary process. It is the act of allowing a student to struggle with a problem when you as teacher could simply give the child the solution. The temptation to pass on the teacher's solution is one that must be avoided if each child is to develop a sense of his own potential as a person. Developing this sense of one's own competence to deal with situations is the beginning of leadership skills. In this sense, the teacher must also let go of his or her traditional role as the leader in the classroom--giving directions, answering questions, etc.--in order to let the child's leadership skills blossom.

One student leadership program, developed and tested by Whitmore (1973), has been used to modify undesirable attitudes and classroom behavior through the use of social power in the peer culture.

The process involves student leaders in seeking answers to the question "How can our school become a better place?" Although it begins by using natural peer-group leaders, the author suggests that all students in an elementary school could be given the opportunity to participate and develop leadership skills. Of course, a leadership program requires the efforts of the entire faculty if it is to be carried out successfully. This is not as easy as it sounds. In most schools, teachers have enough to do with the regular routines already in place. Teachers must ask themselves, then, whether the goals of leadership development and positive attitudes toward school are worth the effort and in some cases, whether something must be given up in order to achieve them.

As we have seen, there are a variety of ways in which teachers can assist students in the development of their leadership potential. They can begin by looking at their own attitudes and values, trying to discover from them some ways of changing their own behavior. They can construct appropriate environments for the fostering of leadership, and they can create situations and programs that will enable students to acquire and extend leadership skills. In doing so, teachers need to keep firmly fixed in mind the needs of the many as well as the needs of the few. It is easy to focus one's attention on students who display the talent and capacity for leadership. It is more difficult to provide opportunities for all students. Neither should be neglected if we are to have a cadre of leaders at all levels for the twenty-first century.

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